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### Deposited in DRO:

12 December 2016

### Version of attached file:

Accepted Version

### Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

### Citation for published item:

O'Neill, Michael (2016) 'The changed measures of light' : post-romanticism and Geoffrey Hill's difficult revelations.', *Romanticism.*, 22 (3). pp. 331-340.

### Further information on publisher's website:

<https://doi.org/10.3366/rom.2016.0294>

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## 'The Changed Measures of Light': Post-Romanticism and Geoffrey Hill's Difficult Revelations

Keywords: light; Romantic; guilt; vision; vision; lyric; spirit

It is this essay's working hypothesis that, for the contemporary poet, Romanticism amounts to more than a set of possibilities from which the poet strolling round the thematic and prosodic shopping mall can select, before nipping off to the Renaissance palazzo or Modernist speakeasy. It is more like an ineluctable predicament, like a genetic make-up, or wave after wave of after-shock. Geoffrey Hill is a poet whose influences and allusions cover a prodigious range of authors and languages, but they operate in the radiant shadow of Romantic poetry and culture. For Hill, a key aspect of the Romantic bequest is the guilt indistinguishable from writing poetry, a guilt paradoxically expiable only in poetry. The issue is broached early on in his essay 'Poetry as "Menace" and "Atonement"', where, after noting T. S. Eliot's ability to sustain 'rhetorical mastery' for all his advocacy of 'humility and surrender', he asserts: 'I do so in the context of that obsessive self-critical Romantic monologue in which eloquence and guilt are intertwined, and for which the appropriate epigraph would be one abrupt entry in Coleridge's 1796 Notebook: "Poetry – excites us to artificial feelings – makes us callous to real ones."'<sup>1</sup>

The thought is not new with Romantic writing (one might think of Augustine weeping over Dido's fate while remaining indifferent to his parlous spiritual state),<sup>2</sup> yet it takes on a particular urgency, as poetry begins its long exile from other modes of discourse able to confer authority and authenticity. Eloquence twines round guilt so often in Hill it becomes a post-Romantic *donnée* of his work. One needs a sub-Joycean coinage like

‘grandguiltoquence’, to do justice to this doubled presence in his poetry. Hill does not eschew the ‘grand’ or ‘eloquence’, even as he dramatises the ever-present if spectral pervasiveness of writerly ‘guilt’, and his poetry often embodies the ‘positive virtue of negative statements’ whose presence in Hopkins’s ‘Carrion Comfort’ he praises (*CCW* 7).

Hill is post-Romantic in the way in which he positions himself amidst the ruins of tradition, nowhere more so than in his dealings with light, both a property of poems by dead poets and a perpetually tantalising gift to the living. The final section of ‘In Memoriam: Gillian Rose’ contains the half-line, ‘This ending is not the end’,<sup>3</sup> and something of that aversion from complete finality pervades Hill’s later poetry, as in the close of ‘Coda’ from the same volume (*A Treatise of Civil Power*), where echoes of the concluding movement of Shelley’s *Adonais* are audible. Following on from the phrase ‘first unknowing’, the sixth and last section of ‘Coda’ reads:

which is an abashed way invoking light,  
 the beatific vision, a species of heaven,  
 the presence of the first mover and all that,  
 great grandfather and Dante’s *Paradiso*  
 understanding each other straight-on, to perfection.  
 I fear to wander in unbroken darkness  
 even with those I love. I know that sounds  
 a wicked thing to say. (*BH* 600)

Hill's 'a species of heaven' serves a not dissimilar function to Shelley's 'Heaven of song' in *Adonais* (413).<sup>4</sup> In both cases, the notion of a 'heaven' dies hard, in the act of conceding its constructed nature. Hill finds a place in his 'heaven' for his great grandfather, a Welsh puddler, Shelley in his for Keats, the critically vilified Cockney poet. The modern poet begins his 'Coda' by 'invoking light, / the beatific vision', much as Shelley does in his reference to 'The Light whose smile kindles the Universe' (*Adonais*, 478) in a would-be final recuperation of all that is best about 'the Universe' and as he posits as his ultimate goal the star-like soul of Adonais that 'Beacons from the abode where the Eternal are' (*Adonais*, 495). Yet Hill's poem flinches from a re-tracing of Shelley's voyage beyond limits, itself undertaken with tenacious courage and gripped by terror as the Romantic poet imagines himself 'borne darkly, fearfully afar' (*Adonais*, 492). Hill moves quickly in the quoted lines. He imagines 'the presence of the first mover and all that, / great grandfather and Dante's *Paradiso* / understanding each other straight-on, to perfection', where, for all the irony in the casual, even half-dismissive 'and all that', God, the poet's ancestor, and the culmination of medieval Christendom's great poem seem, momentarily, close to 'understanding each other straight-on'. It is, as Jeffrey Wainwright observes, 'a powerfully yearning visionary conclusion'.<sup>5</sup>

Yet what follows reprises Shelley's recognition of the need to reckon with and on 'darkness': 'I fear to wander in unbroken darkness / even with those I love. I know that sounds / a wicked thing to say'. It is 'a wicked thing to say', as in *A Treatise of Civil Power* (2005) rather than the 'damn-fool thing' which it is in *A Treatise of Civil Power* (2007),<sup>6</sup> partly because it appears to disown community of experience with loved ones, but also because it arrogantly supposes that the poet may be in a position 'to wander in unbroken darkness / even with those I love'. This assertion clearly has familial resonance in context, but it is suggestive, too, of the modern poet's relationship with canonical poetic figures and suggests

a shared condition of ‘unbroken darkness’, where ‘unbroken’ looks astringently at the more triumphalist suggestions of ‘unbroken’: ‘an unbroken line of succession’, for instance. Still, what may be ‘unbroken’ is ‘brokenness’, the rupture between Dante’s beliefs and his Romantic and modern heirs’ suspended disbelief. The phrase ‘unbroken darkness’ betokens Hill’s sense of kinship between himself and Romantic and post-Romantic others (such as Shelley) for whom any pursuit of paradisaic light will involve itself with ‘darkness’.

Such an entanglement both enables and is fought against as Hill seeks to assert moments of revelation. ‘[Un]obliterate certainties hidden in light’ (*BH* 515), from the end of ‘Offertorium: Suffolk, July 2003’, is a line close to my topic, partly through the ‘difficult’ way it makes an affirmation; ‘certainties’ there may be, but they are hidden in light, rather than revealed by it, less conspicuous than intractably ‘unobliterate’. The sense goes one way – towards discovery; the movement of the word (after one leaves behind the opening prefix, ‘un’) goes in another – towards obliteration. Yet the line, like the poem, composes an ‘offertory’ (‘Offertorium’ is Latin for the offertory), a gathering of alms, ‘Abundant hazards, / being and non-being’, as Hill has it, with a wry glance at Wordsworth’s ‘Abundant recompence’ (89) that compensates for ‘loss’ (88) in ‘Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey’.<sup>7</sup> The poem itself seems to be ‘hidden in light’, its meanings ‘hidden’ in the ‘light’ of poetic purposes it has glimpsed, hiding, as if guarding, ‘Unobliterate certainties’.

If Hill desires the revelations that light betokens, he is extremely, even pugnaciously wary of them too. On the one hand, with Cesare Pavese (Hill’s point of departure for his ‘Pindarics’), he feels, at times, that light is both reality and symbol. Hill, in this mood, would endorse Pavese’s remark that, in Dante’s *Paradiso*, canto 23, ‘All these phenomena of light’ are not among ‘the substitutes that rob reality of its very lifeblood and reality’, but a means of expressing ‘the luminous reality of the place’.<sup>8</sup> Pavese’s aphorisms are normally shot through with intense disillusionment, to which Hill is responsive in his ‘Pindarics’, as in 26

which circles round Pavese's quoted words, '*suffering serves no purpose / whatsoever*' (*BH* 548; see Pavese, *The Business of Living*, 110). But in his apprehension of 'luminous reality' Pavese anticipates aspects of Hill's poetry. *Paradiso*, canto 23 is at once burdened by and joyously equal to the task of articulating through its images what cannot be articulated. As Dante breaks in to assert metapoetically, 'figurando il paradise, / convien saltar lo sacro poema' (61-2), or, as Robin Kirkpatrick's translation has it, 'imagining this Paradise, / the sacred poem has to make a leap'.<sup>9</sup> It is a 'leap' which Dante makes through accumulated images of brightness and luminosity.

Hill shows himself to be highly sensitive to such images, yet to be suspicious of them, too, wary of tracing steps similar to those trodden by Eliot in his later Anglican poetry of reconciliation, a poetry that is too comfortably 'enlightened', one might say for Hill, who retains great admiration for poems such as 'Marina', which does not mention 'light' among its returning 'images'.<sup>10</sup> In his 1929 essay on 'Dante' Eliot praises the *Paradiso* for its 'masterly use of that imagery of *light* which is the form of certain types of mystical experience'.<sup>11</sup> It is hard to imagine Hill not responding in a complicated way towards this kind of assertion, concurring yet wanting to put the statement under stress. For Hill's moments of concurrence, one might note how Christopher Ricks has pointed to Hill's reworking in 'Scenes with Harlequins', V of Eliot's lines from 'Burnt Norton', III that themselves complexly describe a 'dim light' and bring to mind as a significant absence 'lucid stillness'.<sup>12</sup> Hill, that is drawn, to Eliot as a poetic master in affairs of light, even as his 'Motley of shadow' in the poem Ricks quotes (*BH* 188) is a 'light' less mystical than this-worldly. For his wish to place Eliot's praise of Dante under stress, one might turn to his apparently not wholly approving comment that 'Eliot's discovery of Dante is inevitable' ('Dividing Legacies' in *CCW* 374). To put it differently: it is the 'woodthrush calling through the fog' from 'Marina' (Eliot, *Complete Poems*, 110) which seems particularly suited to

Hill's sensibility (see his comments in 'Eros in F. H. Bradley and T. S. Eliot' in *CCW* 552-3), along with the line (or part line) from the same poem which, possibly in reparation to Eliot, he quotes at the end of his essay 'A Postscript on Modernist Poetics': 'Living to live in a world of time beyond me' (*CCW*, qtd 580). Hill singles out 'beyond me', with its double suggestions of beyond my comprehension and outside my own being, as among a number of cases that illustrate how 'The act of composing is itself the instant of composure, even when it is discord that is composed' (*CCW* 580).

Epiphanies centred on light induce a rich and at times contestable ambivalence in Hill's poetry and criticism. John Lyon, one of Hill's most fervent champions, seeks to further his praise for the poet by criticising Larkin's 'High Windows' thus: 'the poem comes to settle "poetically", and too comfortably, into its final, vague, unearned epiphany:

... And immediately

Rather than words comes the thought of high windows:

The sun-comprehending glass,

And beyond it, the deep blue air, that shows

Nothing, and is nowhere, and is endless.'<sup>13</sup>

'By contrast', Lyon continues, 'windows are few in Geoffrey Hill's poetry' (Lyon 120) and Hill 'refuses easy epiphany' in a section from *The Triumph of Love* that does not allow such a refusal to 'become self-effacing' or 'self-cancelling' (Lyon 121). It is into such thickets of what seems special pleading that Hill can conduct his admirers. Hill's later work – tangled, wrought, obstinately intent on its sometimes obscure purposes – displays an admirable

integrity, but assignation to him of an ethical watchfulness that is unavailable to Larkin needs itself to be watchful about its own manoeuvres. In the lines just quoted, Larkin shies away from one evident trigger for transcendent associations: he does not use the word light, even as his poem is flooded by what pours through ‘sun-comprehending glass’. That phrase recalls Yeats’s ‘rook-delighting heaven’ (1) in ‘The Cold Heaven’ and by extension that precursor poet’s state of being ‘Riddled with light’ (9).<sup>14</sup> John Bayley comments that ““Sun-comprehending glass” is as triumphant as Yeats’s “rook-delighting heaven” in the way it sweeps an ancient majesty of language right up to the moment’, and, indeed, for all their differences, Hill and Larkin share a Yeatsian ability to make from ‘an ancient majesty of language’ something urgently contemporary.<sup>15</sup>

Lyon does not mention this echo, with its taming of Yeatsian rage into something bordering on yearning despair, nor does he point out that Larkin’s ‘epiphany’ is at best a glimpse of air that ‘shows / Nothing’. If one wished to be hyper-critical, one might apply to that enjambment Hill’s own comment in ‘A Postscript on Modernist Poetics’ on lines from Keats’s *Hyperion*: ‘Instead of sweets, his ample palate took / Savour of poisonous brass and metal sick’ (CCW, qtd 566). Hill finds a ‘degree of petulance within the suffering’ that is ‘perhaps suggested by the verb form “took savour” and by the moment of enjambment in which, presumably, he might have come up with some alternative less satisfyingly wounded’ (CCW, 566). But even that comment is only dubiously true of Keats (if more applicable to the figure of Hyperion, as Hill half-appears to intend, though ‘come up with’ seems to identify ‘he’ with the poet), and, on further reflection, untrue, too, of Larkin. The exhibition of poetic skill need not imply self-regard. One might argue (Hill does not wholly disavow such a reading) that ‘took / Savour’ shows Keats’s awareness that suffering can be, has to be, experienced and, to the degree that all experience for him is intensely apprehended, relished, albeit negatively so. For its part, Larkin’s ‘shows / Nothing’ hovers between let-down and a



glimmer of negative transcendence. It is, in Lyon's words, neither 'self-effacing nor self-cancelling'. It rehearses the upward look that betokens the quest for transcendence but it finds only 'deep blue air', a massive emptiness that surrounds our vulgarised ideas of 'paradise' (here the easy sexuality enjoyed by the young, mockingly denied to Larkin's generation).

'Scrupulosity can kill / like inattention', Hill writes in section 28 of *Speech! Speech!* (BH, 302): Hill's comment on Keats borders on 'Scrupulosity', Lyon's on Larkin edges towards 'inattention'. It is, however, in the area of scrupulous self-critique that Hill, if at times, grimly self-approving, is often poetically productive, as charting the fate of 'light' in some poems reveals. *Speech! Speech!*, in large part about 'words' and their abuse – Hill, one imagines, could never start a sentence as Larkin does with 'immediately / Rather than words' – begins as follows:

Erudition. Pain. Light. Imagine it great

unavoidable work; although: heroic

verse a non-starter, says PEOPLE. (BH 289)

The opening triad of nouns composes its own mocking version of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. Light vanishes for much of the sequence; 'Pain' and 'Erudition' are pervasive, jostling presences. The pain has much to do with the poet's sense of dealing with a 'PEOPLE' for whom 'heroic verse' is a 'non-starter'. The sardonically proclaimed erudition is bound up with the articulation of this pain. Brian Cummings hears Hill as 'revoking the muse as much as invoking her', yet he argues that the sequence's opening alludes to the start of Book 3 of *Paradise Lost*: 'HAIL holy light, offspring of Heav'n first-born, / Or of th'

Eternal Coeternal beam / May I express thee unblam'd? Since God is light' and that Milton, too, 'is expressing uncertainty'.<sup>16</sup> Certainly the heroic and the self-lacerating fight word by word in passages from *Speech! Speech!*. Hill or his speaker refers in 3 to 'this harp of nerves', setting its 'inconstant / measures' against 'Scattergood /Commodity'. Both phrases endure the see-saw indignity of a rocky enjambment, but the former settles momentarily for 'the wings of suspension', while the latter offers the god of this world, mockingly, 'my contractual retraction' (*BH* 290). In this section, as elsewhere, sound and sense attune the poet's down-at-heel, post-Coleridgean 'harp of nerves' to what he feels obliged to 'retract': namely, the work performed by his 'daimon' and 'inconstant / measures' that develop by pulling back, advance in the form of a muttered retreat.

Light is among the forces that test the limits of such potentially arid 'scrupulosity', joining those impulses that lead Hill to say in section 54, 'Consider how this sways / argument across the line | if / it is argument' (*BH* 315). Light returns to the poem as an unargued argument for lyric towards the latter half of the sequence, especially in section 102 with its glimpse of 'A pale full sun, draining its winter light' (*BH* 339). But lyric revelation does not exactly hold sway. Section 102, admittedly, sustains something close to questioning semi-hope throughout, even positing as a possible place to 'end' 'a *Paradiso* / not accounted for, unaccountable', the imagined manifestation of 'apprehension's covenant' (*BH* 339). Such Imagist or Symbolist solutions tend to question themselves in Hill: 'AND', he asks, sure enough, 'is this vision enough ...?' at the section's close. More generally, the uses of light in the sequence invite consideration of Hill's own remarks about authorial drafts: 'Rather than saying, "see how clever this particular leap of the imagination has been", I find myself repeatedly urging, "how recalcitrant, how obstructive, this material is"' (*CCW* 566).

Such 'recalcitrant' obstructiveness insists on its presence in *Speech! Speech!* and often takes the form of a rhetoric of double reference. Hill seems at once to refer to

something external to the poem yet to speak in continuously metapoetic terms. An example is the use in section 80's opening line of '*augenblick*' which Ann Hassan argues persuasively is a reference to Beethoven's cantata *Der Glorreiche Augenblick*, written in 1814 and celebrating the powers of Russia Prussia Austria and England and their triumph over Napoleon.<sup>17</sup> Hill goes on to add the apparent gloss, 'The nadir of your triumph', but seems to be talking to himself before he embarks on what feels like grudgingly unconvinced yet 'beautiful' lyricism: 'Even today the light / is beautiful – you can hardly avoid / seeing that', 'that' taking an emphasis that introduces a note of banality in an undercutting gesture that is, pace Lyon, 'self-cancelling'. Yet self-cancellation leaves an affirmative residue. The effect bears witness to its own 'glorious moment' and suggests, too, an inner light, one of Stevensian chill, attained by 'the mind's invisible cold conflagration' (*BH* 328). Against these moments of light stand calculatedly bad jokes, mockery of the poet using language as imperfect defence and parody of 'enlightenment'. Light, in this sense, features as the '*son / e lumière*' of section 33 (*BH* 305), with its hint of 'shabby aesthetics' (Hassan 102), or as the butt of embittered wit at the end of section 56, with its full-on caps: 'YEOMANRY HORSEPLAY FAILS AS LIGHT RELIEF' (*BH* 316).

*Speech! Speech!* fools round with voices, typography, clichés, exclamations; if a Rembrandt painting ('THE POLISH / RIDER') prompts him to ask 'Come here nearer the light' (*BH* 342), the discovery will be a let-down (see Hassan 130). At the close, Hill wishes to hang on to 'AMOR', even if that first word of the sequence's last line passes into 'MAN IN A COMA', to pass on still further into 'NEMO. AMEN' (*BH* 348), into a final confession of being no one and uttering a prayer. Invocations of light share in the poem's exhausting slog towards a 'Poetics of self-rule' (section 117, *BH* 347) that may seem 'all / improvisation' (section 115, *BH* 346). The sequence's gnarled enjambments and snarling second thoughts, its mixture of 'erudition' and 'pain', excoriate an 'Age of mass consent' (section 22, *BH* 299)

in thrall to ‘the PEOPLE’s voice’ (section 38, *BH* 307), and compose what is less an attack on democracy than on an adulterated debasement of language. The poem concedes to ‘light’ a contingent fineness, but often regards as, at best, the product of a random ‘vision or seizure’ (section 44, *BH* 310)

In *The Orchards of Syon*, however, lyricism recovers its nerve, even if in section XXX Hill breaks out with the truculent ‘Lyric cry lyric cry lyric cry I’ll / give them lyric cry!’ (*BH* 380). That ‘lyric cry’ may be, in Blakean fashion, both spontaneous eruption of feeling and protest, as when the Romantic poet hears in ‘London’ how ‘the Chimney-sweeper’s cry / Every black’ning Chruch appalls’ (9-10),<sup>18</sup> and Hill, always a poet on close terms with Blake, conveys a fraught, intense attitude towards ‘lyric cry’: as he uses it, the phrase implies both a scorned sentimental expectation on a certain kind of reader’s part and a stubbornly authentic commitment to vision on the poet’s part. Hill’s poems have always been charitable towards ‘The bones that cannot bear the light’ (*BH* 4), as he puts it in the early ‘Genesis’, where light is both exposure (something brought to light), including the horrors of history, and, proleptically, ‘light’ as the ‘light of light, supreme delight’ (*BH* 139) evoked in coldly ardent mimicry of devotional intensity in the poem ‘Tenebrae’. *The Orchards of Syon* is marked, as Rowan Williams notes, by recognition of ‘the givenness of things here and now’ which does not quite equate to a ‘celebration of the “rightness” of here and now’.<sup>19</sup> As Williams points out, *Speech! Speech!* ‘is, professedly, an anatomy of Sodom ..., the counter-type of civil community to the City of God’ (Williams 64). Such a heavenly City looms more evidently into view in *Orchards*. Often it has the shadowy ache of a near-forgotten dream. Alluding to Calderón’s *Life is a Dream*, Hill writes in the first poem as though he were wishing to offer ‘a pact with light’, though the ironic self-awareness is strong – strong both because he presents himself as a rhetorical conjuror whose ‘hands / confabulate their shadowed rhetoric’ and because he suggests the gap between existence and language: ‘I shall

promote our going and coming, / as shadows, in expressive light' (*BH* 351). Yet that gap is a link too; shadows could not exist without 'light', and if the medium of apprehension is poetry's 'expressive light', it allows 'our going and coming' to appear 'as shadows'.

Light is 'expressive' throughout *Orchards*, sometimes with startling recovery of lyric intent, as in XIII, where the poet makes himself 'Await / new-fangled light' (*BH* 363). The light may be 'new-fangled', but even that adjective seems minted anew, to suggest new creation, not just novelty for novelty's sake but something newly discovered, in touch with the 'radiant light of grace' (*BH* 349) of which the volume's epigraph from Thomas Bradwardine's *De causa dei* speaks. In section XIII the light passes into what 'I take as apprehension, new-aligned / poetry with truth and Syon's Orchards / uncannily of the earth' (*BH* 363). The poet apprehends ('takes as') 'apprehension' as a form of fresh discovery that conveys its activity through the muscular, fluid run-ons. Hill's achievement is deftly to enter a territory in which difficult revelation seems easy, natural, and uncannily 'new-aligned'. The end of this exquisitely affirmative section, though, turns away from any 'angel', orthodox, Rilkean, or Stevensian, wryly recognising that 'I've recast / my furthest revelation' – for which he again finds at the close an expressive image, one that is 'blurred and refocused, blurred afresh by rain'.

'Blurred afresh by rain' situates revelation in the ordinary, a blur of memory, witness, and longing, a springing up again of faith in poetry. Light is on the side of steadfast witness but also of dream; in section XXIV Hill asks 'why in the world this light is not / revealed', where 'this light' may be a transcendent signal as it suggests 'your phantom showings, Goldengrove' (*BH* 374). The writing could not be more delicately balanced between a sense of being 'on the wrong / side of the sudden doors' and of those doors swinging open to display a grace of unexpected rightness. At times they blur, these worlds and these lights, as in the 'random and wholly / articulate light' of the next poem in which 'Eternal orders flash

balancing / acts in the East Window', and in which the poem sways back towards asserting that 'the Orchards of Syon' are 'not just any mirage', before again involving us in confusion by glossing that assertion with the words 'Bless poetics / if this is what they are' (BH 375). Is 'this' a 'mirage'? Is 'this' the fact that they are not a 'mirage'? 'The spirit materializes', sustaining these equivocations, is a phrase from XXVI, in a poem that evokes, with something close to loving irony what the speaker calls 'this light / fantastic' (BH 376). The entire poem pivots on images of light, moments when spirit materialises, even as these moments may belong as much to the yearning imagination – 'the creator's dying gift', as XXXII has it (BH 382) – as to the world itself. 'May belong' but the burden of XXXII is, or appears to strive to be, strictly non-idealist; it strives for an aesthetics of seeing that is an ethics of attention and, in being so, counters the 'inattention' that Hill critiques in *Speech!* *Speech!*: 'Closer to nightfall the surface light is low toned. / This is England; ah, love, you must *see* that; / her nature sensing its continuum / with the Beatific Vision' (BH 382).

'Syon is not a time or place but a mental vision', writes Jeffrey Wainwright.<sup>20</sup> Hill rebuilds Syon or Zion or Jerusalem in an England that is less a green and pleasant land than a 'last embodiment / indefinitely loaned' (XXXII). The use in this section of Paul Celan's word '*Atemwende*' ('breath-fetch', or breath turn) marks an appeal to one of Hill's exemplary figures for support, support that is technical (the line-ending enacts a breath-fetch) and experiential. The phrase may also serve either to enhance or to question the post-Eliotic idea of England's 'nature sensing its continuum / with the Beatific Vision': merely a 'breath-fetch' or an instance of what can be fetched by poetic breath. The 'surface light may be low-toned', but the tone of the passage which follows is almost unbreathably high, consciously so. Hill manages to keep his poetic vision earth-bound as he moves, towards the close of section XXXII, from 'Clear sky' to 'Loud, peat-sodden, / the swaling Hodder'. Hill's own medium

is itself ‘swaling’ as it creates its own troughlike trench through which continuing poetic waters can flow, and catch late gleams of ‘featherlight aesthetics’ (XXXII).

‘Rara traluze notturna lampa’; Leopardi’s line from his *La sera del dì di festa* (‘The Evening of the Holiday’), line 6, means something like ‘a rare night lamp shines through’ (Jonathan Galassi translates it more freely as ‘night lights / glow ... only here and there’).<sup>21</sup> The phrase is alluded to at the close of section XIV of *Orchards* and Hill follows in Leopardi’s footsteps in the sequence, himself seer and seen: ‘a solitary lamp, *notturna lampa*, / night’s focus focusing, Leopardi saw, / himself a stranger, once, returning late, / from some forsaken village festival’ (BH 364). Leopardi’s ‘notturna lampa’ offers, in the end, little comfort to the poet who looks from his window, suffering the pangs of unrequited love and overwhelmed by existential hopelessness, the passage of time and the thought of Italian culture’s vanished renown and power. (Hill recasts Leopardi as ‘returning late’ rather than as confined to his room.) Whether Celan’s poetic witness persuades one to read Hill’s ‘Beatific Vision’ as having the status of ‘some forsaken village festival’ is among the uncertainties bequeathed to the reader by this beautiful section from *Orchards*. On another reading, Leopardi’s canto, like his glimpse of a night lamp, is a form of ‘breath-fetch’, able to ‘pierce [the reader’s] heart’ (see line 45, Galassi, 110-11) as well as his own. That glimpse of light in Leopardi turns, through his poem’s conveyance of breath, into at least two recollections of song: ‘the lonely song of the workman’ (line 26) and the more disembodied ‘song heard on the road’ (43). These affecting summonings of song seem, in the end, Leopardi’s best stay against the anguish by which, in his level-toned, stoically serene way, he is afflicted. Something comparable happens in section XIV of *Orchards*, in which with stricken robustness, Hill asserts, his affirmation groping its way across the line-ending: ‘Memory / finds substance in itself’.

The sense of dwelling liminally between two places is at the heart of *Orchards*, as in section LXIII, which, in the aftermath of ‘bereavement’ (*BH* 413) moves between death and life, life and death. The ‘*Land / of Unlikeness*’, taking off from rather than alluding to the title of Robert Lowell’s 1944 first collection, is noted as ‘a similitude’, presumably for a notion of the after-life, then glossed by the phrase ‘certitude / moves to dissolution’. There is a sense of momentary likeness, ‘similitude’, that then falls into ‘dissolution’, even as the falling away is ‘an answer’. Hill comments that ‘our one tolerable *scena*’ has ‘two minds’, a state that holds for *Orchards* as a whole; one at least of its ‘two minds’ seeks to affirm in a low-toned way the here and now, as emerges in the final movement of section LXIII: ‘Abruptly the sun’s out, striking a new / cleave ... the light itself aromatic’. That ‘new / cleave’ is a cut made through consciousness by nature and language, and makes possible the synaesthetic impact of ‘light’.

Briefly Hill recalls the close of William Carlos Williams’s *Asphodel, That Greeny Flower*: ‘Asphodel / has no odor / save to the imagination / but it too / celebrates the light. / It is late / but an odor / as from our wedding / has revived for me’.<sup>22</sup> Williams turns to the imagination for support in evoking a symbolic odour that turns his odourless flower into an image that heartens and links with his wish to assert that ‘The light / for all time shall outspeed / the thunder crack’ (p. 335): possibly an equivocal celebration, given the poem’s preoccupation with the nuclear bomb, yet one which the poem strives to bring into ‘The light’ of imaginative endorsement. Hill’s light is of this world and of the mind, and of imagination, and therefore never wholly just naturalistic, or never merely dogmatically so. ‘In Ipsley Church Lane 2’ concludes by asking whether manifestations that compel the poet stand in their own keepings finally or are annulled through the changed measures of light.



Imagination, freakish, dashing every way,  
defers annulment. (*BH* 501)

The ‘changed measures of light’ here seem Heraclitean, agents of annulment, staging show after show of appearance, denying any permanent essence. And yet they are ‘measures’, corresponding to the rhythms used by a poet who has ‘changed’ his style from the formally virtuosic into verse that is more abrupt, bending its movement to conform with impulses ‘dashing every way’. Imagination, depending itself on ‘changed measures’, relying on the ‘appearances’ made possible by ‘light’, ‘defers annulment’. In an distinctly post-Coleridgean way, Hill’s ‘Imagination’, here, ‘reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities’.<sup>23</sup> It thrives on ‘light’, yet it is in creative tension with ‘light’, too, since it attempts to keep at bay the ‘annulment’ which may be the final consequence of ‘light’, understood as the medium of endless change.

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Poetry as “Menace” and “Atonement”’, in *Collected Critical Writings: Geoffrey Hill*, ed. Kenneth Haynes (Oxford, 2008), 5. Hill’s prose is quoted from this edition, hereafter abbreviated *CCW*.

<sup>2</sup> See Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. with intro and notes Henry Chadwick (1991; Oxford, 1992), 15-16.

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<sup>3</sup> Geoffrey Hill, *Broken Hierarchies: Poems 1952-2012*, ed. Kenneth Haynes (Oxford, 2013), 591. Hill's poetry is quoted from this edition, hereafter abbreviated *BH*; page numbers are added for the reader's convenience

<sup>4</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley: *The Major Works*, ed. Zachary Leader and Michael O'Neill (2003: Oxford, 2009, lightly rev. edn.).

<sup>5</sup> Jeffrey Wainwright, "'The Impossibility of Death'", in *Geoffrey Hill: Essays on His Later Work*, ed. John Lyon and Peter McDonald (Oxford, 2012), 97.

<sup>6</sup> For commentary, see Wainwright, 98. *BH*, thus, restores the 2005 reading.

<sup>7</sup> *21st-Century Oxford Authors: William Wordsworth*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> Cesare Pavese, *The Business of Living: Diaries, 1935-1950*, trans. A. E. Murch (with Jeanne Molli) (London, 1961), 145.

<sup>9</sup> Dante, *The Divine Comedy 3: Paradiso*, trans. and ed. Robin Kirkpatrick (London, 2007).

<sup>10</sup> T. S. Eliot, *The Complete Plays and Poems* (London, 1969), 109.

<sup>11</sup> *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. with intro Frank Kermode (London, 1975), 229.

<sup>12</sup> Christopher Ricks, *True Friendship: Geoffrey Hill, Anthony Hecht, and Robert Lowell Under the Sign of Eliot and Pound* (New Haven, 2010), 41-2. Eliot is qtd as given in Ricks.

<sup>13</sup> John Lyon, 'Geoffrey Hill's Eye Troubles', in *Hill: Essays on His Later Work*, ed. Lyon and McDonald, 120. Larkin is quoted as given in Lyon.

<sup>14</sup> W. B. Yeats, *The Poems*, ed. Daniel Albright (1990; London, 1994).

<sup>15</sup> John Bayley, 'Too Good for this World', in *Philip Larkin 1922-1985: A Tribute*, ed. George Hartley (London, 1988), 200.

<sup>16</sup> Brian Cummings, 'Recusant Hill', in *Hill: Essays on His Later Work*, ed. Lyon and McDonald, 41. Milton is qtd as given in Cummings.

<sup>17</sup> Ann Hassan, *Annotations to Geoffrey Hill's 'Speech! Speech!'* (Brooklyn, NY, 2012), 13.

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<sup>18</sup> Blake is qtd from *Romantic Poetry: An Annotated Anthology*, ed. Michael O'Neill and Charles Mahoney (Malden, MA, 2008), 39. For the suggestion that Hill might have Blake in mind, I am grateful to Sarah Wootton. For Hill's sense of the word 'cry' as 'the minimal utterance which, paradoxically, is expressive of a multiplicity of psychic nuance: abandonment, affirmation, solitude, communion', see his essay 'What Devil Has Got into John Ransom?', *CCW* 142.

<sup>19</sup> Rowan Williams, 'The Standing of Poetry: Geoffrey Hill's Quartet', in *Hill: Essays on His Later Work*, ed. Lyon and McDonald, 62, 63.

<sup>20</sup> Jeffrey Wainwright, *Acceptable Words: Essays on the Poetry of Geoffrey Hill* (Manchester, 2006), 118.

<sup>21</sup> Giacomo Leopardi, *Canti*, trans. and annotated Jonathan Galassi (London, 2010).

<sup>22</sup> William Carlos Williams, *The Collected Poems: Volume II 1939-1962*, ed. Christopher MacGowan (Manchester, 2000), 336-7.

<sup>23</sup> *Biographia Literaria*, ch. 14, qtd from *Coleridge's Poetry and Prose*, ed. Nicholas Halmi, Paul Magnuson and Raimonda Modiano (New York, 2004), 495.